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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000089

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SUBJECT: RE-ENGAGING WITH SYRIA: THE FRENCH EXPERIENCE

REF: DAMASCUS 82

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C/NF) Summary: Aware that relations with the SARG are under review in Washington, French Ambassador Michel Duclos, who played a key role in restoring French-Syrian bilateral relations offered his recommendations for re-engaging: ignore rhetoric and focus on actions, understand the Syrians' emphasis on honor and prestige, and be prepared for commitment delivery to morph into something different from originally envisioned. Though hardly carrying a banner for Syrian diplomacy during the Gaza conflict, Duclos did note that the French had found the SARG responsive to their request for help in convincing Hamas to cease firing rockets and later helpful in pursuing Palestinian reconciliation efforts. Duclos speculated that Syria's relationship with Hamas would be self-limiting: Syria had no interest in seeing Hamas or other MB-inspired movements taking power in the region. Duclos's experience indicates that it is possible -- employing appropriate tactics -- to restore channels of communication with the Syrians fairly quickly but the process of reaching common understanding on key issues is an ongoing struggle. End Summary.

¶2. (C/NF) French Ambassador Michel Duclos January 28 compared notes with Charge on dealing with the SARG. As one of the architects of France's re-engagement with Syria, Duclos is locally credited with providing excellent advice to Paris on the sequencing and modalities of French-Syrian rapprochement. Having mentioned in the past that SARG officials are often dogmatic and unresponsive even when there is a good bilateral relationship, Duclos laughed with wry appreciation when Charge posited that "the only thing more frustrating than not talking to the Syrians is actually talking to them." Aware (as is virtually every living soul in Damascus) that relations with Syria are under review in Washington, Duclos diffidently offered his recommendations for dealing with the SARG.

Do's and Don't's in Dealing with the SARG

¶3. (C/NF) "Don't pay too much attention to rhetoric." Duclos acknowledged that the question of U.S. re-engagement with Syria has arisen just as President Bashar al-Asad's post-Gaza rhetoric has become increasingly confrontational, but he advised USG policy-makers not to set too much store by Bashar's public comments. First, he said, given the reaction to Gaza in Syria and the region, Bashar would naturally need to match his tone to the strong sentiments on the ground) "he has no choice." Duclos asserted that the language related to Israel in Asad's January 16 Doha speech was not that much worse than Saudi King Abdullah's. Second, Duclos observed that in meetings between Bashar and French VIPs,

Asad's presentation of his views tends to be more pragmatic and surprisingly thoughtful. The longer the meeting, Duclos said, the better able Asad is to articulate his views. At the same time, no matter how Asad has expounded in the meeting, when a contrasting official French view is put forth, Asad accepts the demarche and agrees to consider it. Duclos painted a picture of relatively constructive, if lengthy, private meetings.

14. (C/NF) "The Syrians care deeply about honor and prestige."

Duclos noted, as we have observed ourselves (reftel), that the way an issue is presented to the Syrians is nearly as important as the content of the message. Imagining a U.S./Syrian dialogue, he agreed that the Syrians would react more constructively in the first instance to issues that directly concern U.S. interests (such as foreign fighter flows into Iraq). Starting meetings with matters that aim at vital Syrian sensitivities (Lebanon, Iran) could raise their hackles. No matter in what order issues are raised, Duclos observed that it was important not to dictate terms; the Syrians want to believe they are engaged in a true exchange of views. (Comment: What Duclos did not mention but is most certainly the case is that any interlocutor must be prepared to endure long presentations of Syrian ideology and victimology. End Comment) In passing, Duclos indicated that Lebanon has fallen on the French priority list; he said that Paris raises Lebanon much less frequently than in the past, noting there are currently no urgent items on the Lebanon agenda.

15. (C/NF) "Don't expect the Syrians to deliver on promises in the way we would expect them to." Using a diplomatic

DAMASCUS 00000089 002 OF 002

formulation to describe what Duclos agreed in the West would be seen as reneging on commitments, he argued nonetheless that the Syrians do deliver, at least partially, or in some way that the SARG views as making good on a deal. Avoiding the still unfulfilled SARG commitments to have an ambassador in Beirut and a border demarcation process begun by the end of 2008, Duclos instead raised the French experience with Syria during the Gaza crisis. Duclos said the Syrians had been receptive to Sarkozy's January 6 appeal that they persuade Hamas to stop firing rockets. Even though Hamas had not abided by the Syrians' request, the French were satisfied that the SARG had made a bona fide effort. (Comment: Regarding the Lebanon commitments, the SARG dismisses concerns they did not deliver literally on the promises, claiming that the establishment of diplomatic relations and the opening of an embassy were more significant than naming an ambassador. End Comment)

Syria's Helpful Role (?)

16. (C/NF) As ever laconic, Duclos would not be drawn into a detailed discussion of Syria's difficult relations with the other Arabs during the Gaza crisis. Asked if France was disturbed that Syria had been accused by other Arabs of championing Iran's interests during the recent jostling among the Arabs during the Gaza conflict, Duclos said, "it is not an issue for us." Charge argued that a breakdown in inter-Arab relations would be a problem for all of us if it prevented efforts at stabilization in the region. Duclos responded that he thought Bashar was "at the top of his game." (Comment: With Duclos, it is impossible to tell whether he meant ironically this is the best Bashar can do or whether he thinks Bashar is performing brilliantly. End Comment) Duclos said he agreed with the notion that Syria could not be pried away from Iran through overt pressure but could be encouraged to make choices (e.g., negotiations with Israel) that would have the effect of cooling the relationship.

17. (C/NF) Duclos thought the Syrians were legitimately trying

to be helpful on Palestinian reconciliation, even though they were clearly sympathetic to Hamas's demands for more equitable treatment vis a vis Fatah. The willingness of Hamas to accept a national unity government, he implied, was in part due to Syrian influence. He did not express a view about whether Palestinian Authority PM Salam Fayyad should keep his job in a unity government but he did not argue with the notion that Fayyad's presence was critical for donor confidence. Permitting himself a rare speculative comment, Duclos said that he believed Syria's relationship with Hamas would eventually prove to be self-limiting. Hamas's value as a card to play now was quite high but the prospect of having Hamas or similarly-inspired movements in power in the neighborhood was not welcome to the avowedly secular SARG.

18. (C/NF) Comment: Though he is envied by the local diplomatic community for his access to Syrian officials, Duclos still has his frictions with the SARG. The Minister of Education convoked him last fall to protest one line in a history book in use at the French Lycee and he has found pursuing some of the commercial agreements reached during the September Sarkozy visit to be very hard going. Duclos also does not hesitate to take on Syrian officials publicly; he said that during the January 22 lunch for EU Ambassadors with Presidential advisor Bouthaina Sha'aban, he took issue with her staunch defense of Hamas as a resistance organization which she supported with quotes from French FM Bernard Kouchner to that effect. "Alright, Hamas is a resistance group," Duclos said, "but they don't actually do much resistance." Speaking privately to her later, he said he told Sha'aban that, "in Europe we have some experience with resistance and we tried there to avoid civilian casualties." Duclos's experience indicates that it is possible -- employing appropriate tactics -- to restore channels of communication with the Syrians fairly quickly but the process of reaching common understanding on key issues is an ongoing struggle.
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